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ABSTRACT

Evidence for sex-typed perception and use of the housing environment is presented in several studies, and implications of such sex-typing for family conflict behavior are discussed. In the first study, conducted with 200 female undergraduates, it was found that sex-typed perception of within-home spaces was related to sex-typed use of personal space on a project measure. In the second study, perception of within home sex-typed spaces was confirmed in questionnaire responses of 26 married student families living in comparable housing. In addition, husbands and wives individually completed conflict resolution stories using a housing model designed for the study. Those who reported use of sex-typed spaces for privacy were more likely to complete conflict stories with withdrawal themes. Implications for the effects of microecology of the home on family interaction were discussed. (Author)

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The Home as a Sex-typed Environment: Implications for Marital Conflict

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Running Head: The Home as a Sex-typed Environment

Paper to be presented at the annual meeting of the National Council on Family Relations, October 1976.

The Home as a Sex-typed Environment:

Implications for Marital Conflict

The purpose of this paper is to consider empirical support for sex-typed perception and use of the housing environment and implications of such sex-typing for family conflict behavior. The perspective taken is that the ecology of the household has important social and psychological effects upon family members both because of their symbolic interpretation of spatial arrangements and because such arrangements structure their social encounters. Glazer-Malbin (1974) has conceptualized the effects of space provided the sexes in terms of (a) information about relative social status of the sexes, (b) access to information about the other sex, (c) access to informal social contacts which may be pertinent to effectively performing social roles, and (d) access to information about the content of social roles. Her paper illustrated how sex segregation of private, public and institutional spaces may be conducive to sex role differentiation.

It is the purpose of the present paper to present evidence from several studies concerning the role of household (e.g., private) space in supporting sex-role differentiated behavior among family members and in structuring family interactions, particularly family conflict. It is not the contention of this paper that spatial arrangements per se have any direct causal effect on family relations. While spatial arrangements may be a reflection of larger societal forces, such as economic structure, space comes to be perceived by family members as symbolically significant in its own right. Abundant evidence exists that spatial and other structural features of housing influence social relations among neighboring

families (Festinger, Schachter & Back, 1950; Caplow & Forman, 1950; Kuper, 1950; Suttles, 1968; Yoshioka & Athaniasiou, 1971). Yet little attention has been given to what Donald Ball (1973) terms the "microgeography" of the household in structuring sex-role differentiated family interactions.

In order to provide some empirical support for Glazer-Malbin's contention that the sex segregation of household space reinforces sex-role differentiation and shapes family interaction, a series of studies was conducted to answer the following questions:

(1) To what degree is the home perceived in terms of male and female territories?

(2) Is sex-typed territoriality within the home related to other family characteristics, such as maternal employment, SES, or family size?

(3) Is sex-typed territoriality within the home related to sex differences in proxemics (e.g., the structuring of interpersonal distance)?

(4) Is sex-typed territoriality related to actual family space use as determined by observational studies?

(5) Does sex-typed territoriality function as a means of structuring family conflict (e.g., withdrawal to a "safe haven")?

The proposed paper will present data supporting each of these questions from a larger project conducted by this author, entitled "The Housing Environment as a Determinant of Family Interaction." Supported by the Institute for Family and Consumer Studies, Purdue University, this

project investigates dimensions of the family's near environment and their effect upon family interaction.

The affective and symbolic significance of space has been an interest of psychologists, geographers, and anthropologists in recent years. With the publication of Hall's Hidden Dimension in 1966, the field of proxemics was born. Sex differences in the use and perception of interpersonal space within Western cultures has been a focus of interest (Sommer, 1959; Jourard, 1966; Mehrabian, 1968; Lerner, 1973; Hartnett, Bailey & Hartley, 1974). Summarizing this literature, one may conclude that women (and girls from an early age) allow more interpersonal approach, touch, and perceive closeness as more affectively positive, distance as more affectively negative than do men (and boys).

Glazer-Malbin (1974) in a recent National Council on Family Relations paper suggested further that public, semi-public, and private spaces may be viewed as assigned to given sex-roles. From a geographer's point of view, Robert Beck (1967) has argued: "The physical and interpersonal properties of the environment are distributed in space, and personal environmental space is shaped by the configuration of these properties. Personal systems of spatial learning may yield important insights into individual perceptions of the environment" (p. 18). Thus, from several disciplines comes the suggestion that not only interpersonal space, but spatial settings themselves are charged with affective meaning, one important component of which is sex-appropriateness.

Sayings such as "A man's home is his castle," "A woman's place is

in the home," express in folk wisdom the fact that husbands and wives, sons and daughters use family space differently and that further, sex-linked role prescriptions have traditionally been associated with such usage. Women ought to be <u>in</u> the nome whose boundaries are defended by the males standing outside.

However, evidence for such a sexually differentiated perception of spatial settings is lacking. Further, strength of such perception is expected to be a dimension along which individuals will vary substantially. Hence, the concomitants and determinants of strength of sex differentiated spatial perception are of interest. Secondly, the possible relation between sex differentiation in perception of the familial setting and responses to family conflict need to be explored. In a highly speculative vein, one may suggest two possible relationships: first, when areas are perceived as appropriately feminine or masculine domains, they provide unequal opportunities for retreat, exclusion, and home court advantage. Secondly, when interpersonal space itself carried different sex-linked affective implications, such stereotypes may influence marital partners' perceptions of both spatial and symbolic approaches and withdrawals during conflict. For example, for those women who perceive male approach as potentially more threatening and aggressive than female approach (and more aggressive than men perceive female approach), it is possible that both literal and psychological approaches during conflict will be ambivalently received.

A brief overview of the studies to be reported is appropriate here. Study 1 explored perception of sex differentiated space within the home and sex-typing of interpersonal space in a sample of 200 young women, using questionnaire and projective measures. Study 2, using a sample of 26 3-person families, each in comparable physical settings (married student families with one child), further investigated sex differentiated space in relation to the handling of hypothetical decision making and conflict situations.

Study 1: Sex typing in the affective interpretation of interpersonal space

This study explored the affective interpretation of interpersonal dyadic space when sex of dyad and distance varied. In addition, evidence for sex differentiated perception of familial space was collected. It was hypothesized that individuals who strongly linked affective interpretations to both distance and sex of dyad would also be likely to perceive sex differentiated familial space. Underlying this hypothesis is the argument that individuals socialized to differentiate space as "male" and "female" in one context might be likely to do so in others. Support for this hypothesis might be taken as support, therefore, for the notion that sex-typing of space is a component of the learning of sex-role stereotypy.

Method: Two hundred female undergraduates participated in this study. Only women were selected for this study because sex differences in the perception of interpersonal space are already well documented. Each subject completed a general questionnaire on "home and college

housing" embedded in which were a number of items designed to measure sex differentiation of familial space. The latter was conceptualized as having two dimensions: 1) identification with an area (e.g., mother and kitchen) and 2) privileged access (e.g., ability to exclude others). A total of six questions were asked, three referring to identification, three to privileged access.

In addition, each subject completed a projective measure designed to elicit affective interpretation of interpersonal space. Nine silhouette pair drawings using all combinations of three distances X three sex of dyad combinations were presented in random order. In response to each presentation, subjects were instructed to write a story answering the following questions: Who are these people? What are they doing? What are they thinking? Half of the respondents completed the projective measure before the questionnaire, half after. No order effects were obtained.

Results: Five categories were derived from analysis of the protocols: acquaintance (stranger, acquaintance, friend, intimate), affect (positve/ negative), approach-withdrawal, activity (parallel, casual, personal), and touch (presence-absence). Based upon previous studies of sex differences in interpersonal spacing, it was possible to score each individual's responses for degree of sex-typing. A score of 1 was given to each "story" containing sex-typed material in three of the five categories. Thus, a maximum score of nine was possible.

Insert Table 1 about here

As Table 1 indicates, affective interpretations were strongly influenced by both sex and distance in three of the five categories, acquaintance, affect, and activity. Comparisons among means indicated that decreasing interpersonal distance signalled an intimate relationship involving increasingly personal activities. Close male pairs, however, were perceived as affectively negative (55%) rather than positive (19%) (percentages do not sum to 100 due to elimination of low frequency categories) while close female pairs were perceived as generally positive (49%) rather than negative (7%). Heterosexual pairs received approximately equal positive and negative affect statements.

The results supported other studies (Guardo, 1969, 1971; Melson, 1976) showing that close interpersonal distances involving a male are more likely to be perceived as intimate yet negative than are similar female interactions.

When protocols were scored for frequency of sex-typed responses, scores ranged from 3 to 9 ($\bar{x}$ = 7.8). Thus, the sample as a whole reported strongly sex-typed perceptions of interpersonal space.

Responses to the six questions dealing with sex differentiation of familial space were next analyzed. Since responses to both identification with an area and privileged access were highly intercorrelated (+.89), they were combined for analysis.

Table 2 presents the frequency distribution for differentiation of

space attributed to mother, father and children.

Insert Table 2 about here

For the sample as a whole, spaces were differentially associated with parents, but not with children. When differentiation in terms of specific areas was examined, however, different patterns emerged for father and mother. "Kitchen" was named by 80% of those respondents identifying any maternal territory, while no single paternal territory was named with higher frequency than 30% (garage).

Such responses may be compared with the level of sex-typed responding on the projective measure discussed earlier. Keeping in mind that the sample as a whole exhibited strongly sex-typed responses on both measures and, hence, the distribution of responses was skewed, the correlation between sex-typed perception of territoriality and sex-typed perception of interpersonal space was +.41.

Interesting relationships between perceived territoriality, SES (as defined by the Hollinghead scale) and maternal employment were also obtained. These findings may be summarized as indicating that sex-typed perceived territoriality declines both with increasing SES and with maternal income (but not employment per se). Similarly, both SES and maternal income (again not employment per se) are significantly associated with increased likelihood of reporting a "study" or "den" as a paternal area.

Discussion: The results of study 1 are considered to support the hypothesis that sex-typed perception of interpersonal space and sex-typed territoriality within the home are positively related. This may indicate an underlying characteristic, such as extent of cognitive organization around the categories of "male" and "female." Kohlberg (1966) suggests, for example, that sex-role socialization involves the cognitive task of structuring the world in male-female terms.

Another interpretation is also possible. Those who perceive sex-typed territoriality also perceive the allocation of sex-appropriate roles in spatial terms; e.g., both a role and a proper space are allocated together. Thus, the mother's role of chief cook and bottle washer assigns her the kitchen. With increasing SES and prestigeful outside employment, others are more likely to take on both the "cook" role and its territory.

Study 2: The data reported here were part of a study examining correlates of environmental stress in intact families. Some of the data have bearing on the question of sex-differentiated familial spaces and may help generate hypotheses concerning implications for family conflict. The advantages of the whole family approach are obvious. First, more unreliable retrospective accounts are avoided. Secondly, both husband and wife are interviewed independently. Thirdly, families within the same stage of the family life cycle (mean years married = 4.6 years) and living in comparable housing (identical floor plan units of married student housing) are studied, thereby holding constant many dimensions of the immediate environment.

Although the study was not designed to specifically investigate sex differences in space use or in the significance associated with space use, the data provide some evidence bearing on questions 4 and 5 posed earlier. Question #4 asked: Is sex-typed territoriality related to actual family space use as determined by observational studies? Question #5 asked: Does sex-typed territoriality function as a means of structuring family conflict?

Method: Twenty-six married student families each with one or two children under 12 living in identical floor plan units of married student housing participated in the study. Subjects were recruited at random by door to door contacts within married student housing and were reimbursed for their participation. Sample characteristics are presented in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 about here

Each family completed two questionnaires, the Family Space Inventory, measuring environmental stress and adjustment, and the Family Environment Scale (Moos, 1969) which measures perception of family environment along ten dimensions such as cohesiveness, conflict, intellectual orientation, organization, and control. The spatial movements of each family were observed in two home visits during the 4-6 p.m. period, which previous research (Inman, 1972) indicates as peak use hours. Finally, a projective measure was designed for the study. Using a scale model of a similar apartment and manipulable figures and furniture, each adult and child over three years of age was individually given four situations to complete.

need conflict, decision making, child praise, child reproof.

For the purposes of this paper, both the space observations and responses to the projective measure are of particular interest. The space observations provide data on space use in individuals responding to territoriality questions in questionnaire form, while the projective measure allows subjects to enact spatially their responses to various affect conditions. Guardo (1969) and Melson (1976) have shown that both children and adults strongly associate differing interpersonal distances with differing affect states, with anger associated with large distances and friendliness with smaller distances.

Results: Responses to the housing model projective measure were classified into approach and withdrawal categories, for example: "They sit down together and discuss the problem" (approach) and "He has to go out so he just goes; she'll have to understand" (withdrawal). Nonverbal responses were similarly coded. Space observations (recorded in five-minute intervals) were analyzed for time spent in common vs. separate areas.

The relation between approach/withdrawal responses and territoriality both as observed and as reported was of interest. Territoriality in terms of privileged access was virtually nonexistent in the sample studied, but territoriality as defined by identification with and use of space was more common.

In answer to the question "Where do you go when you want to be by yourself?" husbands responded: bedroom, 12%; kitchen, 8% living room, 62%; nowhere in particular, 19%. Wives responded to the same question:

bedroom, 4%; kitchen, 50%, living room, 39%; nowhere in particular, 8% (X^2 = 11.9, df = 4, p $<$.01). Wives were significantly more likely to choose some area and more likely to choose specifically kitchen than were husbands.

In addition to this sex difference in reported spatial use, it was found that those who checked "nowhere in particular" also made fewer adaptive responses (X^2 = 57.41, df = 33, p $<$.005) such as cutting down noise level, getting out more often, setting up a schedule, etc., designed to ameliorate perceived stress and enhance their living conditions. Observed territoriality, defined as the ratio of separate to shared space use, was very high in the whole sample during the observation period (approximately 4:1).

Finally, the use of territoriality for privacy was significantly related to number of withdrawal statements in response to both need conflict and decision making stories (t = 2.87). However, observed separate space use was not related to approach/withdrawal projective responses.

Discussion: The positive relation between identification with spatial areas within the home and positive adjustments to perceived environmental stressors suggests that Virginia Woolf's "room of one's own" (or favorite chair) may function to defuse family conflict. This may occur because family members avoid potentially divisive decisions by a clear allocation of space, much as a clear division of family tasks functions to similarly minimize conflict. The sample studied in particular identified problems of space adequacy as a frequent source of family stress[1]

and hence, a not surprising adjustment to such a situation would be an allocation of subspaces to individuals.

Suggestive also for further research is the greater frequency of withdrawal responses to hypothetical need conflict and decision making stories among those who chose either within home or outside home territories in questionnaire statements. Perhaps when affective needs are tied up with a spatial location, the latter becomes a "safe haven" under conditions of conflict.

These findings are significant primarily in their indication for more research focused specifically on familial perception of and use of the immediate physical environment. The second study supported the findings of the first that home spaces are perceived as differentially identified with each sex. Secondly, the results of the second study suggest that such sex-typed territoriality functions as an adaptive response to environmental stress stemming from severely limited space. While sex-typed territoriality does appear to be related to both a more general affective perception of space use and conflict responses, the linkages between the three constructs (sex-typed territoriality, affective perception of space, and family conflict responses) remain unclear.

Although the evidence is skimpy, I would like to suggest an hypothesis for future research: Space use and differential access to family space is built into marital role prescriptions. Traditional marriages build these prescriptions consistent with traditional sex-role norms.

Since interpersonal space is affectively loaded as well, the existence of such sex-typed norms concerning space helps to structure space use during conflict situations. When the home in general, or specific parts of it, are considered the "wife's," she may use this as a haven for retreat, as a source of power if the conflict centers about that space or takes place there. If the husband is more likely to have no within home territories, or just outside (garage) ones, these areas provide him a source of power and haven for retreat as well.

The first study obtained SES difference in frequency of such within home and outside home territories. With higher social class, territoriality is weakened and this seems to be associated with more communication and less withdrawal in conflict.

The second study supported the findings of the first that home spaces are perceived as differentially identified with each sex. Secondly, the results of the second study suggest that much sex-typed territoriality functions as an adaptive response to environmental stress stemming from severely limited space.

The relation between class differences in family communication skills and class differences in space allocation as part of role performance needs to be further explored. Similarly, the studies reported here indicate that maternal employment status appears related to sex-typed territoriality. One needs to delineate those factors associated with the perception of territoriality in general and sex-typed territoriality in particular for families at different stages of the life cycle.

Finally, the mechanisms by which space is used to structure conflict situations need to be studied. To what degree are marital conflicts centered about the allocation of space itself? Why are identification and privileged access to spaces sometimes associated with withdrawal responses? What factors mediate this relationship?

It is hoped that further research on the microecology of the home will inform the concerns of designers, family practitioners, and all those involved in the understanding of family life.

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Footnotes

1. More than 50% of the sample indicated that amount of living space was "very stressful" and that the words "hemmed in" and "crowded" characterized their living conditions.

Table 1. Analysis of variance of protocol responses to projective space measure

Source	MS	df	F
Category 1: Acquaintance			
Sex of pair	7.64	2	4.0**
Distance	.89	2	0.44
Sex of pair x distance	6.74	4	3.02**
Category 2: Affect			
Sex of pair	8.27	2	11.74**
Distance	5.0	2	6.65**
Sex of pair x distance	1.9	4	2.27*
Category 3: Activity			
Sex of pair	14.06	2	6.54**
Distance	.75	2	.41
Sex of pair x distance	19.87	4	9.2**

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Table 2. Relative frequency identification of sex differentiated spaces (n=200)

	None	One	More than one
Father	15%	53%	32%
Mother	15%	56%	29%
Children	68%	23%	8%

Table 3. Sample characteristics, whole family study (n=52)

Variable	Mean
Length of marriage	4.6 years
Mean number of children	1.2
Mean age oldest child	3.6 years
Father's education	12.9 years
Mother's education	12.1 years
Length of residence in present housing	20.2 months
Future planned occupancy of present housing	13.5 months